



## PLAYING ON CLAY - USE OF SPACE & TIME

*Balachandran, M. (India)*

Different surfaces have its own special requirements, which tennis players have to adjust to. The player who is ready to make those necessary adjustments to his/her game, have a better chance of winning. We look at the demands and peculiarities of clay court and the solutions in dealing with the same.

### TIME AVAILABLE TO PREPARE & SELECT SHOTS

On clay, as the ball comes off the court slower than hard or grass, there is more time to prepare for the shot. This allows player, time to think, meaning, more options with ball. Options can lead to confusion or indecision unless, he/she has a clear idea what he/she wants to do with the ball.

To avoid this indecision we need to take care of 2 issues:

1. Clear game plan based on the player's preference (game style).  
Game plan will help him/her decide what is the best option, he/she can use.
2. Practice
  - a) Hitting dead/soft balls,
  - b) Mid court balls– aggressive,
  - c) Targeting serves.

Practice gives the player confidence when a similar situation arises during the match.

### SPACE

This extra time allows better use of space on one's side of the court. Players can play from behind the baseline during a rally or to return serves. This extra time and space, allows for better preparation (wind up) on the ground strokes.

They can move back to return a high ball. Also, can run down wide balls and make an offensive return, even while defending.

As the opponent has equal space, an idea of exploiting that space is essential. Eg; drop shots when the opponent is too far behind the baseline, acute angle cross courts.

Better understanding of the space available, will give the player a better idea of point construction on clay.

### ADJUSTMENTS IN THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS:

**1. RETURNS.** While on faster surface, one has to move-in to cut the angle and force the return, on clay, the player can move back and have a good swing at the return. Time and space discussed above allows this return. Position to return can be further back than one's positioning for faster surface.

Note: *(the advantage of returning on the rise is negligible compared to the loss of advantage or chance of an error).*

**Drill:** Coach serves and player returns after moving back few steps. Ready position - a step behind usual place.

**2. SERVES.** On clay, as it's not easy to serve an ace or win free points on serve, compared to other surfaces, it's essential to start controlling the point with serve. Accurate targeting and use of spin to open the court are good options.

**Drill.**

- (a) Player serves to targets. Eg. Wide on deuce court with slice; kick serve to the side line on ad court etc....
- (b) Player serves to specific target and plays the point. Emphasise opening the court and controlling the point. He earns the point only if he dominates the point with serve.

**3. MOVEMENT.** Moving on clay is far different from that on hard or grass. Clay allows the player to slide while reaching for the ball. Retaining balance, while sliding, is the key to making a good shot and to recover for the next ball.

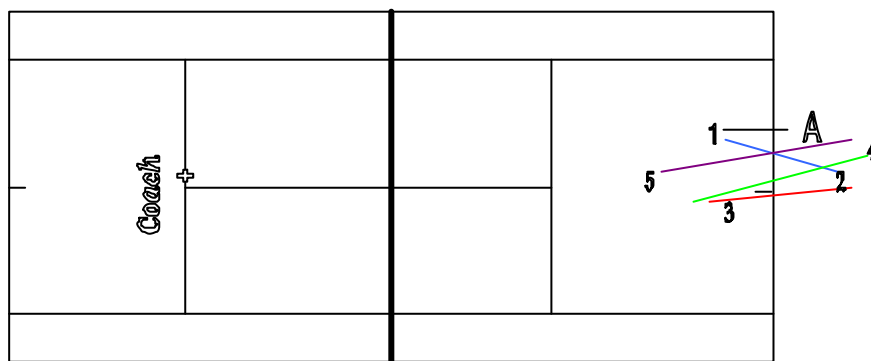
After bounce, the ball gets bit slower and it's essential for the player to 'go' to the ball rather than 'wait' for it. Ball doesn't 'come-on' to the player as on hard. Short steps to get into position will avoid miss hits and help better contact.

While on hard, after the player hits a ball which is inside the baseline, he/she will approach the net on clay, he has to back up to play the next stroke. This requires good use of legs- short, bouncy steps.

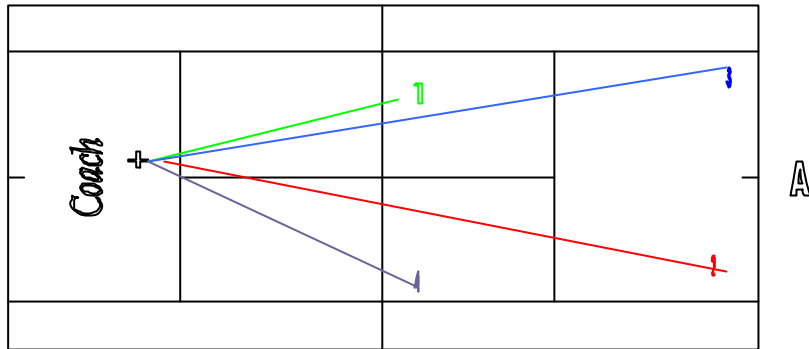
Note: *(use of space and refer return of serve, for comments).*

**Drill.**

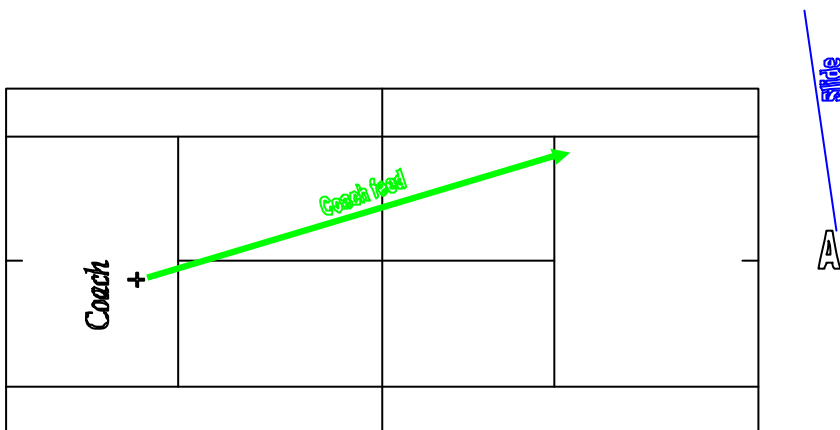
- (a) Shot steps going forward & back- 5 balls .alternate inside and behind the baseline. (Refer-fig 1). **A** – Player. Fig 1.



(b) Drop, lob- diagonal, wide on the opposite side, drop-diagonal- 4 balls. (Refer- fig 2). Fig 2.  
**A** – Player, 1 – Drop, 2 – Lob, 3 – Wide, 4 -- Drop



(c) Slide wide and play an offensive shot. (Refer fig 3). Fig 3. **A** – Player.



**4. GROUNDSTROKES.** Groundstrokes with heavy top spin are a big asset on clay. To be able to hit with pace and keep it in play, fair amount of top spin is essential. Top spin will bounce higher, thus pushing the opponent behind the baseline. On clay, one should also look to hit more forehands; run around more balls on the backhand side and dominate with a big forehand.

**Drill.** From a feed, player has to get the ball to go above a certain mark on the back fence.

**5. VOLLEYS.** Volleys on clay have to be firmer and well directed as the opponent has a chance to run it down. Drop volleys can be used selectively.

**Drill-** Coach feeds the player volleys and plays the point out

**6. DRIVE VOLLEYS.** When the opponent hits a high return of an offensive shot, moving in and making a drive volley will ensure that the player retains the advantage of controlling the point.

**Drill.** Coach feeds and player play the point after making a drive volley. Though forehand side is used more often, it's good to be comfortable making a backhand drive volley.



**7. DROP SHOTS.** When the opponent is quite far behind the baseline, it's easy for him/her to run down wide balls. Playing a drop shot can prevent him backing up too far.

**Drill.** The coach feeds, players play the dropshot and the point out.

**8. WIDE BALL.** As discussed above, the wide balls can be chased down and an offensive shot can be made, on either side. The player can slide into the shot which will help him recover back into the court. On the back-hand side, an aggressive slice is another option too.

**Drill.** Coach feeds wide on either side wide. The player starts from the middle of the baseline, runs down and makes an offensive shot. Using 3/4 players will help in retaining the work/rest ratio, so as to maintain the intensity and speed of the player through the drill.

**9. CONTROLLING THE POINT.** Though the opportunity to defend is higher in clay, one has to be aggressive to win a point. With better technology and fitness, the players are able to hit the ball harder, these days. To stay aggressive and at the same time, to reduce the errors, one has to control the point, rather than go for big shots. A good idea of point construction on clay is essential.

**Drill.** The player serves and plays the point. If server loses the point before he/she hits 5 groundstrokes, receiver gets to serve.

The above suggestions help a player prepare better, to play on slow clay courts. However, playing on clay demands lots of patience and perseverance. Hence, it's important that the player is prepared to 'grind' out each and every point during the whole duration of the match.